

Horses...

As Seen Through the Eyes of an Artist.

by Pamela Ann Ross

Artist Brings Horses to Life

Vincent Van Gogh once said, “I want to touch people with my art. I want them to say ‘he feels deeply, he feels tenderly.’”

This quote holds true for most artists, whether they are sculptors, or painters, whether they hold a chisel or a paintbrush. Erich Fritz is one such artist. As an artist, he loves to paint and draw horses, especially draft breeds. Working with airbrushes or pencils to create his pieces of art, he strives to give the subject matter life beyond paint or graphite on the flat surfaces upon which he works. As each animal has its own personality, so too does he try to give each painting or drawing its own feeling.

Even as a child, Erich’s strong feeling for horses was evident. He was born and raised in the small town of Pitman, New Jersey, the first of five children. As a boy he loved the Wild West. His favorite TV shows were: The Lone Ranger and Zorro. He loved the idea of riding a horse wherever he went. He could be found most days after school playing “Cowboys and Indians” outside with his friends. His bike was his trusty steed that went everywhere with him. He dreamed of one day owning a horse, a dream that would stay with him all his life- a dream that has been realized.

At age 8, his uncle took him to Busch Gardens in Williamsburg, VA. There, for the first time in his life he saw, up close, real live horses. These, however,

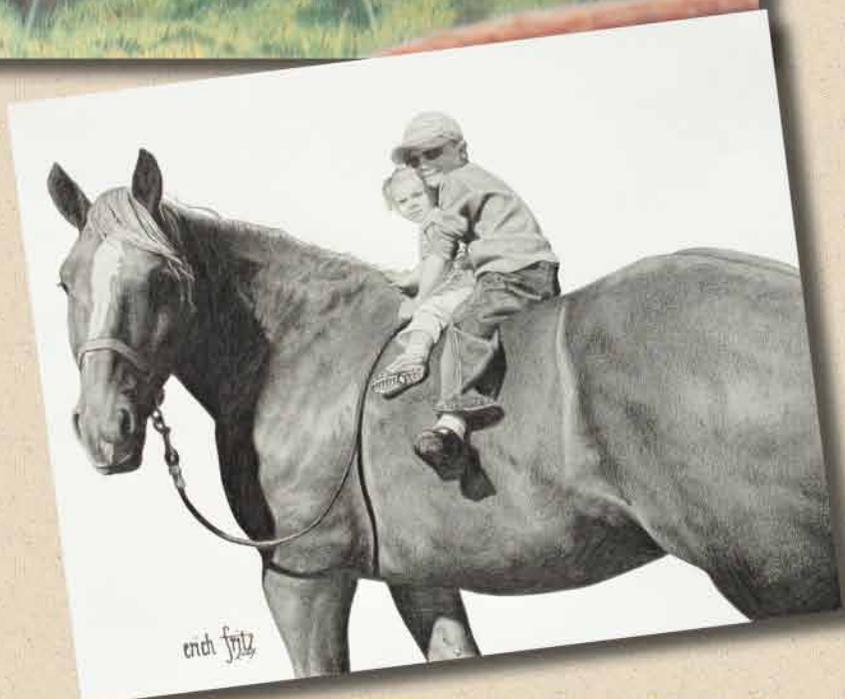
Photo by Erich's son Ayden, age 6



were no ordinary horses, these were the Budweiser Clydesdales. They were immense! He remembers watching the people standing on benches that were as high as he was tall, braiding the manes of the horses for the daily parade. Even on the benches they had to reach up to get at the forelock and mane. At that point, he decided he wanted a draft horse of his own someday. He was amazed at the sheer size and power these animals radiated. It was a sight that was etched into his memory forever. It still gives him goose-bumps to think and talk about it.



Not only is he an artist who devotes much of his time and artistic efforts to portraying horses, but he is also a Belgian Draft Horse owner. He owns two geldings named Koda and Loki. Erich, his wife Patty, and son Ayden acquired them in 2002. They were 5 months and 4 months old, respectively, at the time. His family has had the pleasure of watching them grow from foal to horse.



“It has been a great experience.” Erich says. “These were our first horses. I have worked with them through everything. I’ve watched as they grew and learned, played and chased each other around. They are the living breathing inspiration for much of my work.

My wife’s parents raised and bred Tennessee Walkers in Ohio. At foaling time Patty would go out to help for a few weeks.” Erich says looking off at what seems a distant picture. “I dream, at some point, of getting a filly and raising her the same way we did with Koda and Loki, eventually breeding her. I think it would be great for me to experience. What better inspiration than the creation of a new life?”



Erich goes on laughing, “You know when we first got our horses, we hated the names they had been given, Hank and John. We tend to like odd names. So we asked the gentlemen to rename them. He did so, but accidentally switched their names. Koda was so head-shy and timid, always staying just out of reach. He was to be named Loki, after the Norse god of mischief. Loki was very friendly. He was always the first one to come to you. He was so gentle that we wanted to name him Koda, after the bear in Brother Bear. As they grew, they pretty much grew into their names. Loki is now the one always getting into trouble, and Koda is usually the first one to come to me.”

Each artist must, through trial and error, develop his own, often unique process for creating their art. Erich is no exception. At first, he seeks inspiration. He may have seen a photograph, a film clip or even something one of his own horses has done. Sometimes it’s as simple as a snap-shot of a landscape in which he envisions horses in his mind’s eye.

Once inspired, he decides on a size for the potential work. Generally it is either 16” x 20” or 24” x 30”. The reason behind this is that when he has prints made, he likes to get 8” x 10”s and note cards which are 5” x 7”. These sizes relate to those print sizes quite well.

Once a size is decided on, he cuts the Masonite board to size and primes it. He likes to use Masonite board for his paintings because it’s easy to come by and has a smooth surface which is really good for airbrushing on. Should he decide to use canvas board, he also finds it best to prime that as well. Whatever he uses, the substrate receives at least two coats of primer.

His next step is to look closely at the reference, ponder and choose a color for under-toning the entire piece. Using a foam roller, he paints the whole board in that color again with two coats. This helps to keep a consistent look to the whole piece, by showing through the paint that is laid over it ever so slightly. Anyone who has painted a room in their house knows that it usually takes at least two coats to

get good coverage. Erich uses this transparency to his advantage, keeping a consistent feeling to his paintings.

When that paint is dry, he then sketches out the subject of the piece, usually the horses. He doesn’t always draw in the whole background at this point. In fact, most of the time that is either freehanded in later or sketched in after the main focus is complete. He likes to let a painting develop as he works. He finds that a piece will often grow and evolve as he works, therefore, he doesn’t force it by drawing everything in. He believes that this freedom actually enhances the beauty of the work.

Once the preliminary drawing is done, he gets to work building up the main subject. He starts by slowly building up layer upon layer of transparent color. Erich finds that the transparent color layers give the subject depth and life. He does this all freehand, occasionally using light shields. With most horses, there are at least four shades of brown he likes to use, as well as grey, black, blue and sometimes yellow. White markings are usually painted with light grey using white only for the brightest highlights. Once that element is done, he covers the painted subject with a clear adhesive tape called frisket film. Then the outline of whatever it is is carefully cut out and the excess frisket film is removed.

At this point, it’s time to do the background. He paints from back to front layering the elements of the background over one another. This again gives the depth that he loves so much. Much of the time, he uses the airbrush to make the elements farthest away look blurry as if they were part of a photograph, again adding to the depth of the painting.



Erich and daughter Ayla - on Loki (left), wife Patty on Koda (center) and son Ayden on Tonto (right).



Once the background is finished, the frisket film is removed and the foreground is begun. This is accomplished by once again layering the elements closest to the viewer over the ones farther away. He also uses this opportunity to meld the main focus into the surrounding landscape.

Finished with the foreground, Erich will often stand back and blur his eyes to see if anything stands out or seems out of place. Most often he finds that shadows need to be darkened and colors need to be tinted down. Satisfied by the look of the piece, he adds highlights and details to the entire piece and calls it complete.

The last step is the clear coat that is applied. Using Minwax satin finish clear coat and again a foam roller, he applies at least two coats of clear, making sure there are no bubbles. Twelve hours later the piece is ready to be shipped to his printer for set up and printing.

His pencil pieces are much simpler. He picks the size, usually 8" x 10" or 11" x 14" and then sketches out the line drawing. He then works from the upper left

hand corner down to the lower right hand corner, diagonally, shading and adding texture. He says that this helps reduce smudging from his hand. Many of his art teachers have told him that was incorrect, but it works for him, so he sticks with it.

Erich has been airbrushing seriously for the last six years. He is mainly self-taught, aside from the few videos he owns. He attended The Art Institute of Philadelphia where he earned an associate degree in Visual Communication (advertising). He has won numerous awards for his work, the most recent being People's Choice at the Image 2007 show held in East Central Minnesota. His work has also been the subject of an article published in Airbrush Magazine on how to paint a horse portrait. He also hopes to be working, in the near future, as a mentor to a high school student who wants to become an airbrush artist.

Erich has this to say about his own art. "As an artist, I have always tried to portray a feeling or emotion through my work. I love horses and so I make them my main focus. Whenever I paint or draw one of these majestic creatures, I want

the viewer to "hear and feel" as well as see everything going on in the picture. I want the patron to know what the horses are thinking. Using photo realism, I try to put you, the viewer, right there with the animals. I also like to use odd colorations or markings on pieces that are not portraits of a certain animal.

I have always believed strongly that life exists in the details, without them life would not be as enjoyable. I have, and always will, try to incorporate that belief into my artwork and capture those moments we all live and love in."

Erich Fritz is the owner operator of: Erich Fritz Fine Art, Cambridge, MN. He does custom portraits in paint and pencil, illustrations and murals. He works strictly from photo reference. To see more of his work, and/or inquire about prints, you can visit his website: www.erichfritzfineart.com. Anyone interested in having an original piece done by Erich may e-mail him at: erichfritz@erichfritzfineart.com or check out his website. All of his contact information is there on the site. ■

